'The Murder of Gonzago'

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THE corpses are removed, a volley is fired over Hamlet's grave, and Fortinbras settles down to get Denmark back to normal. Among the petitions which reach his desk is one from a theatrical troupe who have been in prison without trial ever since a disastrous performance some weeks earlier. The charge against them is conspiracy; suspicion against them was aroused by the circumstance pointed out by Dr W. W. Greg and Professor Dover Wilson, who asked 'How is it that the players bring with them to Elsinore a drama which reproduces in minute detail all the circumstances of the King's crime?'.[1] Both Dr Greg and Professor Dover Wilson exculpated the Players; neither suggested that the troupe had been 'sent for' by Hamlet, as a counterblast to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and that they knew or guessed that they were being used, that they had been hired for an extra fee to present a too-relevant play to stir up feeling against the Crown at a moment of political crisis, as Essex's supporters had hired Shakespeare's own company to put on *Richard II* in February 1601.[2] Dr Greg and Professor Dover Wilson produced different answers — neither of them convincing, to my mind — to the question they had raised. But perhaps it was in any case the wrong question? There is no evidence at all that the original script of *The Murder of Gonzago* which the Players had in their luggage when they arrived at Elsinore reproduced the circumstances of Claudius's crime at all closely.

This talk of 'suspicion' and 'evidence' may provoke a quotation from Professor L. C. Knights that in studying *Hamlet* we are not to 'follow up clues as in a detective story'.[3] *Hamlet* is a play, not a

[1] J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, 1935, pp. 5, 139, 140.
[2] J. E. Neale, *Queen Elizabeth I*, 1934, p. 381; *What Happens in Hamlet*, p. 170.
[3] L. C. Knights, *An Approach to Hamlet*, 1960, p. 38.

whodunit. Shakespeare's prime concern when he wrote Act III, Scene II was not to plant clues, tie up loose ends, and combine surprise with plausibility. The play is about death and what happens after it, to body and soul, and every scene in the play is an involvement of the audience in this great pattern, not a trial of wits in which the audience is allowed fair access to all the facts which will help them to spot the solution, under the rules of the Crime Club.

But it sometimes seems as if Shakespeare built into his plays all possible mazes and corridors for later generations to play and exercise themselves in: moral idealism for Bradley, political cabaret for Professor Jan Kott;[1] an Oedipus complex for Dr Ernest Jones, an obsession with boils and ulcers for Miss Caroline Spurgeon;[2] cryptograms for Ignatius Donnelly and Mrs Gallup, and why not a detective-story for whodunit fans like me? Shakespeare can take it. Others abide our question; he has thought of all possible questions already himself.

I return therefore to my police enquiry. If *Hamlet* were a record of actual historical events, if there were real-life actors who had given many performances at Wittenberg of a play called *The Murder of Gonzago* which Hamlet had seen there, what was this original play like? If we take the performance of it that was given at Elsinore, and leave out all the stage directions, leave out the 'dozen or sixteen lines' inserted by Hamlet, leave out — above all — the dumb-show, what remains of the plot as revealed by the actual words spoken? The main character, Gonzago, is a sick elderly man — no parallel to Hamlet Senior who was a handsome powerful athletic figure — and there is nothing in the text to suggest he was a king. The stage direction refers to him as one, Hamlet describes him as a duke, but in the text he is addressed simply as 'my lord'. His wife Baptista is devotedly attached to him, and there is no indication that she is deceiving him or loves another. The third character, Luciano, is an unexplained villain who poisons Gonzago; the fact that Luciano is Gonzago's nephew, or any relation of his, is nowhere stated in the lines

[1] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 1904, p. 90; Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 1964, p. 53.

[2] Ernest Jones, *The Oedipus Complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery*, 1910; Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery*, 1935, pp. 133–4.

spoken by the Players — it is Hamlet himself who provides this gloss.

A loving couple, in worried conversation over the husband's health, and then his murder by a character who could be a political conspirator or a homicidal maniac — that is all; the rest is all interpretation put upon it by the spectators or by the actors themselves under Hamlet's instructions (or, in the case of the dumb-show, going beyond his instructions; the Players, who were not in Hamlet's confidence as to why the original play was to be altered, may be supposed to have thought that his verbal alterations were very amateurish and unconvincing, and needed underlining by a dumb-show to get them across to the audience. The dumb-show is of course necessary for *Shakespeare's* purposes, but not for Hamlet's).[1] Given only the lines from *The Murder of Gonzago* which are spoken in *Hamlet*, it would be perfectly possible to play them with Gonzago going to sleep in a bedroom, not an orchard; it is Hamlet who comments 'He poisons him i' the garden', and has instructed the Players to provide the 'bank of flowers'; Gonzago and Baptista themselves say nothing about the place where he is to 'beguile the tedious day with sleep'. It would also be possible to play it with Gonzago being poisoned by the mouth, not by the ear; the indication that Luciano does the latter is in the stage direction, not in the text. Baptista never speaks a word to Luciano; her guilty understanding with him rests entirely on the evidence of the dumb-show. All that remains, in fact, is a play about the poisoning of a married nobleman. Hamlet would not have had to rack his brains very hard to think of such a play, which by inserted lines and 'business' could be made to serve his turn.

Which were the inserted lines? It is agreed by everyone that they must be lines mainly spoken by the First Player.[2] The passages which turn *The Murder of Gonzago* from a banal story about the murder of a nobleman into a story appropriate to Hamlet's purposes are those in which Gonzago suggests that Baptista will marry again after his death, and Baptista's protestations. A very slight alteration in twenty lines (III.ii. 185–95, 223–34) would leave nothing but a declaration by Baptista that if Gonzago dies she

[1] *What Happens in Hamlet*, pp. 146, 157.
[2] *Hamlet* II.ii. 565–9, III.ii. 1–16.

will never be happy again, and a philosophical discourse on human mutability by Gonzago; no question of a second marriage would come in at all.

Bradley, Dover Wilson and many others maintain that the inserted lines are Luciano's speech, but to maintain this theory it is necessary to reject the theatrical tradition, pointed out by Granville-Barker, that the First Player takes the part of Gonzago.[1] Dover Wilson held that the inserted lines and the scene which moved Claudius were the same;[2] if that were so, the inserted lines would indeed have to be Luciano's speech, but the connection is not inevitable. Certainly it was the 'talk of the poisoning' (i.e. Luciano's speech) that finally moved Claudius; Hamlet had asked Horatio beforehand to watch Claudius during one scene in the play which came near the circumstances of his father's death, and afterwards they agreed that it was the speech in this scene which had put Claudius to flight. But Hamlet did not say that it was the speech which he himself had written. He could have chosen an existing play whose only relevance was that it was about the poisoning of a married man, and then have made it more relevant, firstly by inserting speeches about second marriages for Gonzago and Baptista which made the latter more like Gertrude, and secondly by instructing the actor who played Luciano to put in some extra business — pouring the poison into the sleeping victim's ear instead of his mouth. It was the business accompanying Luciano's speech, and Hamlet's own running commentary, that finally 'frighted' Claudius; the inserted lines, spoken by Gonzago and Baptista, had begun the softening-up process. The original play had indeed 'no offense in't'; it was the inserted lines about second marriages that provoked Claudius's sharp inquiry and Gertrude's criticism.

One can perhaps illustrate the point by supposing Hamlet to be casting his mind over the rest of Shakespeare's plays to find a parallel for the situation he wanted to present. How about the first act of *The Winter's Tale*, if Leontes's suspicions of Hermione and Polixenes were to be made well-founded, instead of baseless? No, it would need too much alteration. How about Henry VI,

[1] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp. 75, 106; J. Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet*, pp. 162–3.
[2] Ibid., pp. 152–3.

Margaret and Suffolk? The situation is a fair enough parallel, but the denouement is wrong. Finally he decides that the murder of Duncan in *Macbeth* could be made to do; by using Act I, Scenes VI and VII, and Act II, Scene II, cutting out and inserting a few lines, he can make out that Lady Macbeth is Duncan's wife and Macbeth's mistress, and incites Macbeth to murder her husband.

On this analogy Hamlet, running over in his mind the Players' repertoire to see which play in it he could most easily adapt for his purpose, no doubt thought first of the actual one he was listening to when the plan occurred to him, the *Dido and Aeneas* from which the Hecuba speech was taken. Could anything be done with Priam, Hecuba and Pyrrhus as Hamlet Senior, Gertrude and Claudius? No, it was too remote from the situation he needed; and by the time the First Player had finished his recitation, Hamlet had already decided to choose another play from the troupe's repertoire. The moment he was alone with the First Player, his first words were to ask if the troupe could put on *The Murder of Gonzago*, a rather tedious play about the impermanence of love and grief. He had already seen how it could be adapted to make a far more gripping drama entitled *The Mousetrap*.
